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American Media on Iran: Hostage to a Worldview

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“Will Iran stick to the JCPOA?”

“How can Iran’s aggressive behavior in the region be curbed?”

“How much longer can the Islamic Republic hold on to power given general discontent and the severe sanctions that are tanking the economy?”

“What do the clerics ultimately want?”

“There seems to be support among Iranians for standing up to Trump’s ‘maximum pressure’ campaign. If Iranians protest against the Islamic Republic in such large numbers, why would they rally behind the Revolutionary Guard in this regard, especially when it shot down the U.S. drone this summer?”

These are questions I often get asked by Western journalists covering Iran and seeking to understand the broader tensions between Iran and the United States. The framework of the questions is nearly always through the lens of U.S. national security, even when European journalists or outlets interview me. Although this is to be expected, as much coverage of foreign countries in U.S. media — if there is any coverage to begin with — is often couched through U.S. national security. Iran has the distinct “honor” of constantly being newsworthy for the West; yet, despite nearly daily coverage in major out-

lets, Iran remains embarrassingly misunderstood. What’s more, a survey of 40 years of English-language news media on Iran reveals a repetition of the same stories and tropes and a general failure to actually see what is happening in the country. The majority of this coverage since the 1979 Iranian Revolution is predicated on the irrationality of the Islamic Republic and the imminent failure of the revolution.

The development of this framework deserves interrogation, as it is a story not just about how we view Iran but about how U.S. news coverage in general has fundamentally changed since the Iranian Revolution. In this article, I undertake an analysis of how Western news coverage of Iran came about following the 1979 revolution and look at the types of stories that are rarely covered but that could actually help gain a better understanding of the country as it is, not as Western journalists and analysts see it.

The Hostage Crisis and Changing U.S. News Media

Images of American flags burning. Diplomats blindfolded, paraded in front of cameras and held hostage for 444 days. Chants of “Death to America” bellowing out in defiant unison from a sea of people on a grainy screen. Forty years ago, these were the images that streamed into American living rooms night after night. They created a framework that has informed American public and policy debates on Iran — namely, a country run by irrational Islamic clerics that is the “worst sponsor of terrorism” in the world.¹ Today,



America's stance on Iran looks almost indistinguishable from 40 years ago.

In 1979, American journalists explained that Iranian protestors seemed to be “possessed by madness.” A segment on ABC News² about the revolution's leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, asked, “Who makes these masses move? Is he divine or senile? A mystic or a maniac?” No other foreign country since Vietnam was broadcast into the homes of America on a nightly basis for such a prolonged period. Indeed, on his nightly news program on Nov. 16, 1979, Ted Koppel said, “Iran has become more than simply a crisis. It is an obsession.”² Yet this obsessive reportage did not translate into a deeper understanding of the politics or society of Iran. When an ABC journalist asked a Columbia University professor during the hostage crisis if the images from Tehran meant that Shi'a Muslims are anti-American, the professor answered yes.³

The majority of experts called upon to provide context for American audiences on what was unfolding in Iran did not speak Persian and

had never been to Iran. Instead, as Edward Said noted in his study of the coverage of the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis, these experts tended to be either historians of early Islam or historians trained in an Orientalist understanding of the Middle East and Muslim-majority countries.⁴ They analyzed the political process in Iran through the lens of 14th century Islam — it became about what jihad and martyrdom meant in classical Islam, not about the ways in which Ayatollah Khomeini was

creating a contemporary political reality that drew strongly on leftist and anticolonial language of the 1960s and 1970s.⁵ Experts who knew little about the country and officials who tried to figure out how they were blindsided by a popular revolution that toppled their staunchest ally in the Middle East converged on this: Iranians had become a people blinded by religious fervor.⁶

The 1979 Revolution in Iran not only upended the long-standing “natural order of domination” when it came to the Cold War, given that Iran was America's biggest ally in the Middle East and a bulwark against potential Soviet meddling in the oil-rich region. But Iran was “lost” to the United States because it could no longer serve American interests, not least of which was its housing of American monitoring stations along its long border with the Soviet Union and its supply of cheap oil. ABC News journalist Robert Dyk reported on Nov. 11, 1979, “Despite the embassy takeover, Iran's oil pipelines to the U.S. are still open. How long that will last is up to the Ayatollah.”⁷ Iran was only important



insofar as it was considered vital to American security.

Perhaps most profound, however, is how the intersection of incessant media coverage, the anger over the taking of American hostages and the views of uninformed analysts gave birth to a worldview that continues to this day: “Islam vs. the U.S.” In essence, Islam as the new enemy, or what reporters and Carter administration officials began to call the “new Cold War,” began in 1979. The global “war on terror” that would come on the heels of 9/11 picked up tropes and lines of arguments that had already been present in American academia, journalism and pop culture for two decades prior.

Ted Koppel reported on Day 26 of the hostage crisis (Nov. 29, 1979), “Crowds [in Iran] whipped themselves into a religious frenzy,” while Barrie Dunsmore of ABC News re-

ported on Nov. 11, 1979 that “the state of anarchy in Iran is such that it’s not possible to deal with that country in any logical or rational way.”² All revolutionaries were lumped together and described as “religious fanatics” who were “consumed and preoccupied by martyrdom.”² Politics were erased from the coverage. The intricacies of the political developments of the postrevolutionary period were rarely covered, especially on network television. Iran was presented in U.S. media as a monolithic country ruled by an anachronistic Islamic leader. As Edward Said argued in his in-depth analysis of U.S. news media coverage of the Iran hostage crisis, “However much the Iranian individual had gained his or her freedom from the Shah and the United States, he or she still appeared on American television screens as part of a large anonymous mob, deindividualized, dehumanized, ruled again as a result. With very few exceptions, the media’s purpose seemed to be to wage a kind of war against Iran.”⁷

Night after night in American television reports from Iran and in American newspapers, Iran became the locus of anarchy and religious extremism. Rarely did any of this include discussions in print or on air about the reasons behind the revolution or the Iranian fear that the United States could stage another coup d’état to reinstate the Shah, mirroring American and British tactics in 1953. The notion that Iranians may have had legitimate political grievances with the West was largely absent from U.S. media coverage. Instead, as President Reagan announced in his inaugural address, on the day of the hostages’ release in January 1981, “terrorism” would replace “human rights” as the nation’s primary policy concern, leading to a



decade in which American military presence in the Middle East increased drastically, including U.S. military intervention in Lebanon (1981–83), military and logistical support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), the covert sale of arms to Iran during the same war, the expansion of arms sales to Saudi Arabia (1985–88), and the U.S. bombing of Libya (1986). The Iranian Revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis reframed American media coverage of the Middle East as a whole and aided in the creation of the war on terror, which has defined U.S. policy toward the Middle East since 1981.

Absent from this outlook of 1979 were the voices of Iranian people protesting rampant corruption by the Shah's elite and severe inequality in an oil-rich nation, as well as the reality of a police state that spied on its people and threw students into jail for carrying a banned book. There was no room to hear about the political grievances of a population against a dictator backed unconditionally by the United States, or resentment about U.S. meddling in domestic politics, including a CIA/MI6-staged coup that reinstated the unpopular Shah in 1953. In short, the American frame on Iran was myopic, and it was

driven by a desire to respond to the humiliation of the hostage crisis. As one Reagan official told me, "Iran slapped us in the face, and we never got a chance to put them back in their place."

News as Entertainment

The lack of depth in American news coverage about the Middle East, or any other part of the world, is not a new observation. What has made the coverage of the hostage crisis in Iran unique, however, and the reason it has held steady for the past four decades can be traced back to the fact that this coverage came about when network television executives were trying to make news profitable. In the late 1970s, only three network channels existed on American televisions: ABC, NBC and CBS. Of the three, ABC News was last in rankings, and ABC executives wanted to reverse this. Rooney Arledge, president of ABC Sports since 1968, who had created "Monday Night Football" and slow motion on television, making ABC Sports a highly profitable endeavor, became president of ABC in 1977. He turned his sights to the network's news coverage. At the time, news on American television included 30 minutes for local news and 30 minutes for national and international news. Arledge had a hunch that there could be an appetite for prime time news in order to broaden the audience, but he needed "a story with legs." When Iranian students overtook the American embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 1979 and the hostages were still held after two weeks, Arledge went to ABC executives and asked for an evening slot every night to air special reports on the hostage crisis.

“The Iran Crisis: America Held Hostage,” a nightly news program on the situation, began to air, and it resulted in high ratings night after night. After a couple of weeks, Ted Koppel, an anchor on the show, was on the phone with Arledge and said,

Roone, there is nothing happening today. We got nothing to say tonight, we shouldn't be doing the special tonight. [Arledge] said, 'Do it anyway. Tell me what an ayatollah is. Tell me what the difference is between a Shia and a Sunni Muslim. I don't care what you do, just put on a half-hour.' And what he was really doing was he had seized that time period and he wasn't going to let it go again.⁸

Eventually, “America Held Hostage” gave birth to a permanent news program on late-night television — “Nightline,” the first of its kind. “Nightline” not only catapulted Ted Koppel to television news stardom but also reconfigured broadcast news in America. Ted Turner saw that audiences were interested in consuming news at different times in the day. “Nightline” became an inspiration for CNN, which started broadcasting in 1980.

And so, as the days went on during the hostage crisis but there was nothing new to report, the nightly coverage on ABC began to shift. On Nov. 21, 1979, they aired a segment that began with, “And certainly at this stage there appears to be something about the Muslims in Iran that has given a special character to the crisis.”² As time went on, understandings of Iran and “Iranian Islam” became racialized in a particularly American way, dehumanizing an entire country and delegitimizing the last popular revolution of

the 20th century. As ill-fated and illegal as the hostage-taking was in Iran, the fact that it was imbricated in the competition among American news networks and the creation of “news as entertainment” — with its attendant logics of capitalism, entertainment and ratings — cemented a new era in television and, in turn, a new enemy in the Middle East, fueling four decades of military expenditure, wars and rationale for the expansion of U.S. empire.

Question Not Asked

In holding steadfast to this framework, American news has created an incomplete picture of Iran. While the lens on Iran in the past 40 years has focused predominantly on the vast human rights abuses and suppressions by the government, there has been a society undergoing complex changes. There are deep debates taking place in newspapers, on websites and through social media and texting channels. These debates range from activists arguing about strategies to abolish the death penalty to veterans pressuring the government to improve medical care as they age. There are films that change the conversation on believing survivors of sexual violence and public poets who challenge the limits of censorship, garnering massive followings. There are teachers and factory workers who go on strike to demand fair wages and imprisoned journalists who refuse to back down from investigating those in power. There are citizens in impoverished provinces who demand attention for the draught and extreme temperatures they face, and there are the young and old with dreams and aspirations in family and love.

The lens of U.S. national security means that we miss these stories, ignoring the dynamic developments in a country that despite 40 years of sanctions and an oppressive state apparatus has produced the most educated population in the Middle East. Instead of freezing Iranian politics in 1979, what could we learn from Iran if we understand that a massive popular revolution that toppled millennia of monarchy did not just disappear when Ayatollah Khomeini took power? Instead, the past four decades have witnessed robust women's, student, worker, artist and journalist movements for change. And beyond that, by only treating Iran as an anomaly, we fail to see the myriad ways in which Iranian society is undergoing the same processes as other societies around the world. One big debate in Iran today is how neoliberalism is threatening artists. Iran's world-famous cinema culture has thrived for a variety of reasons; one of the biggest is that much of the funding for films was provided from state resources, and Hollywood films were not shown in movie theaters. So, films did not have to be commercially successful to be funded, nor did they have to compete with Hollywood films, leading to the creation of the art-house films of Abbas Kiarostami, Asghar Farhadi and others. Now, with the influx of private money, based on the Hollywood model driven by money from the Revolutionary Guard (which has enriched itself not only as an economic powerhouse in the country but also because of the international sanctions on the country), there is new pressure to produce only those films that can produce profits in theaters. This move has led to years of contentious debates and protests by artists and filmmakers

in Iran. Yet some filmmakers and actors are also for this move, as it allows for producers to make commercially successful television dramas that do not need to be censored to be aired on state television but can be sold on DVDs at neighborhood bodegas on a weekly basis with each new episode. This model bypasses state television and all of its restrictions on what can be shown. What can these debates and developments tell us about the future of one of the most influential cinemas in the world?

Iran has a rich media environment beyond films as well. In the digital world, Iran has an internet penetration rate higher than 70%, and Iranians have long been active and present on the internet. Iran has long been at the forefront of shaping internet culture, despite attempts by the state to restrict access. During the peak of weblogs, Persian was the third most used language on the internet, and weblogs spanned all sectors of society.⁹ As the government tried to figure out ways to not only encourage internet use but also control it so that it would not turn into a hub of antiregime activism, Iranian internet activists have been at the forefront of battling surveillance technologies and transforming the online world for all users. As has been documented elsewhere, the massive 2009 Iranian Green Movement gave rise to #iranelection and social media and resulted in the birth of hashtags as an organizing tool online.¹⁰ Due to Stuxnet, the first cyberattack in the world, by the United States and Israel on Iran's nuclear facilities, Iran began to focus more attention on advancing its cyber army, which until Stuxnet was mainly focused on targeting internal dissidents. Iran's cyber army is now among the most powerful in the world,

yet its development has occurred in tandem with cyber activists in Iran and the diaspora who daily put out information for citizens to bypass internet censorship. These cyberactivists have been among the global leaders fighting against cyber surveillance by states because of the Iranian state's effective cyber-surveillance tactics. Although Iranians have been isolated from the use of major Western tech companies and apps because of years of sanctions, there is now a burgeoning indigenous tech and e-commerce world. Iranian versions of Amazon, Uber and YouTube and incubators for new technologies now exist.

Women's sports have also undergone a revolution in Iran since 1979. Although state policies sought to restrict access for women and there were laws enacted that demanded segregation based on gender in many public arena, as feminist scholars of Iran have shown, these laws also conversely allowed women and girls a space to develop in sports and other avenues that had traditionally been closed to them. Due to gender segregation when it came to sports, women have had to learn all aspects of different sports, not being able to rely on men, who traditionally held those positions. This has resulted in gyms and physical education schools opening throughout Iran, to which more traditional families feel comfortable sending their daughters. In the 40 years since the revolution, these discriminatory laws have produced two generations of women and girls who have fought long battles (that continue), demanding resources to build national teams from basketball to volleyball to soccer. Today, these teams compete internationally. This fight has taken place alongside women's fight to have access to stadiums to

watch Iranian soccer matches, a fight that has garnered much more international news attention, culminating in the tragic death of the #BlueGirl, Sahar Khodayari, whose self-immolation led to the government temporarily allowing women into stadiums as spectators.

Conclusion

The repetition of "Islam vs. the U.S." and "Iran vs. the U.S.," created at the intersections of capitalism and American media, has flattened public and policy discourse on not only Iran but the Middle East writ large. Public discourse in the United States is strongly informed by mainstream media, which, as this article shows, is often led less by a desire to inform than to entertain and retain ratings. Although various political factors have led to destructive U.S. policies in the Middle East since 1979, as Melanie McAlister has argued, the media depictions of the region have made it a space where American intervention is ultimately made possible.¹¹ This has not only led to an antagonistic relationship with Iran for four decades but also cost the United States trillions of dollars in two devastating wars to seemingly battle Islamic terrorists, leading to alliances that include turning a blind eye to the repressive and autocratic policies of "moderate Islamic" U.S.-backed leaders at the expense of ordinary people, creating further resentment and despair.

The complete isolation of Iran in Western public understandings on anything but its position vis-à-vis U.S. national security has meant that the predominant framework has

been not only narrow but also highly flawed. Countries do not exist to fulfill U.S. national security. Yet, as the Iranian case shows us, when countries aim to leave the orbit of U.S. national security, the media frameworks that develop in an attempt to produce some form of coherent understanding can oftentimes produce just as tight an orbit.

Notes

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